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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR KIRF VM

SUBJECT: (C) DISSIDENTS AND POLICE STEP UP ACTIVITIES IN HCMC

REF: A) HANOI 2077 AND PREVIOUS; B) HCMC 436 AND PREVIOUS; C) HCMC 759; D) HCMC 808; E) 05 HCMC 818

HO CHI MIN 00000925 001.2 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: Seth Winnick, Consul General, HCMC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Two new political activist networks are emerging in the HCMC consular district working alongside more established dissidents. The new groups - the 8406 Bloc (named for their April 8, 2006 manifesto) and the Bach Dang Giang Foundation -- are more activist and daring than the more cautious, individualistic and intellectual dissidents such as Dr. Nguyen Dan Que. These new groups appear to be keying their activities to coincide with the November APEC Leaders' Meeting and the President's visit. Along with the Democratic Party of Vietnam, these groups are capitalizing on frustration over land disputes to gain popular support. A Hanoi-based lawyer, Nguyen Van Dai, is at the center of many of these new political dissident activities (see Ref A for more on Dai). Nonetheless, Dai has somehow managed to avoid thus far any tough police response against him; police, however, have targeted many other emerging activists for detention and possible prosecution on national security grounds. At the same time, authorities are trying to calibrate their response to protect Vietnam's international image in advance of APEC. End Summary.

New Dissident Activity in HCMC

¶12. (C) Hanoi-based lawyer Nguyen Van Dai and dissident Bach Ngoc Duong met with us at their request on July 28 to detail recent activities of the "8406 Bloc" of dissidents. (Note: The 8406 Bloc is named for its pro-democracy manifesto of April 8, 2006. The group is led by Hue-based activist Father Nguyen Van Ly and HCMC-based dissident Do Nam Hai, aka Phuong Nam. End Note.) Dai and Duong reported that after traveling from Hanoi to Hue to meet with Father Ly, they had met with 15 other leaders of the 8406 Bloc in HCMC on the evening of July 27. Fourteen of the participants were from HCMC, and one was from Vinh Long in the Mekong Delta. Participants included Truong Quoc Huy, one of the PalTalk arrestees released in early July (Ref B), Pastor Tran Mai and Pastor Ngo Hoai No of the Inter Evangelical Movement (IEM) house church group and Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang. Also in attendance were representatives of the Bach Dang Giang Foundation (www.bachdang.org).

¶13. (C) Dai said that the Bach Dang Giang Foundation is planning a nationwide demonstration before the APEC Leaders' Summit in November. He said the foundation runs a nationwide student/youth network that remains "largely hidden," and has a reasonably good chance of success of pulling off its APEC protest(s). According to Dai, Pham Ba Hai is the head of the Bach Dang. He said Hai is a private Vietnamese businessman who resides in India. Internet research shows that the Bach Dang Giang Foundation website is updated from Jaipur, India and is hosted in Colorado.

¶14. (C) According to Dai, the 8406 Bloc leaders decided that they would establish a political party only when Vietnam becomes a multi-party system. Dai said that the Bloc's future party would want a close relationship with the United States, creating an "axis of cooperation" stretching from Seoul and Tokyo through Taipei and Hanoi. Until domestic conditions permit, bloc

members will continue to promote human rights in an "organized, but non-political way."

Dai Critical of the DPV

15. (C) Dai told us that, while he has the utmost respect for octogenarian dissident Hoang Minh Chinh, he is breaking with Chinh's project to reestablish the Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV). Dai said that the DPV is a party in name only as its leaders have differing opinions that have yet to be reconciled into a coherent political vision. Dai was opposed to the strategy of DPV Deputy General Secretary Tran Khue not to criticize President Ho Chi Minh and not to challenge the question of the Communist Party's "leading role" under the Constitution. Moreover, the DPV is disorganized, yet it plans to nominate a number of independent candidates for the 2007 National Assembly election. Dai believes the CPV will use the DPV to manipulate the international media on the extent of political freedoms in Vietnam. According to Dai, the meeting participants rejected Hoang Minh Chinh's idea of merging the DPV and the 8406 Bloc.

16. (C) Dai said that the 8406 Bloc, with nearly 2,000 "official" members and an additional estimated 10,000 supporters, is focusing on long-term grassroots development, including establishing offices in the provinces and training local representatives. (Dai did not elaborate how such offices and training would be carried out under the scrutiny of the CPV and

HO CHI MIN 00000925 002.2 OF 004

the Ministry of Public Security.) The 8406 Bloc would "reevaluate" the role of Ho Chi Minh and would demand that Vietnam adopt a strict multi-party system that would force the CPV to contest elections like any other party. The 8406 Bloc plans to call for a nationwide boycott of the "unfair" National Assembly elections. Dai claimed that only one U.S.-based Viet Kieu group affiliated with Dr. Nguyen Xuan Ngai supports Tran Khue. He asserted that most overseas Vietnamese are supporting the 8406 Bloc "financially and otherwise." (An Internet search shows Dr. Ngai as the Deputy of the People's Action Party.)

17. (C) Dai said that, while helping to found the bloc, HCMC-based dissident Do Nam Hai is not involved operationally in its activities. However, in a conversation on August 15, Hai told us he is the Bloc's Southern representative and involved in its activities, including drafting of the Bloc's documents. Hai said he is not aware of the activities of the Bach Dang Giang Foundation. Hai said that he has not experienced any recent harassment, although he technically remains subject to a USD 2,000 fine for previous "misuses of the Internet and the illegal publication."

Dai's Other Activities

18. (C) Dai said that, for the past four months, he has hosted three young lawyers (a fourth dropped out due to intense police pressure) at his office in Hanoi, allowing them to use the "Skype" Internet telephony program to work with human rights lawyers in the United States. The Vietnamese lawyers are being trained to practice human rights law in Vietnam. Dai told us that he seeks to establish a similar project in HCMC. He asked the U.S.-based brother of democracy activist Dr. Nguyen Dan Que to sponsor such a program, but has yet to receive a response.

19. (C) In our meeting on July 28, Dai said that he plans to participate in a conference in Bangkok from August 1 to 6, organized by Viet Kieu dissident Doan Viet Hoat. Leaders of the Thai Democratic Party, several political parties from the Philippines and U.S.-based NGOs are to attend. Dai said he plans to lobby for assistance in training Bloc 8406 personnel in campaigning, demonstrating and operating a political party. In a conversation on August 15, Dai told us that he did not travel to Thailand, but sought to send three representatives from Hanoi. Luong Duy Phuong (a lawyer working with Dai) and Phan The Hai (a reporter for the Internet news website VietnamNet) were prevented from attending. However, Dai said that he was able to send a third individual, who he refused to name. He has not had contact with the third participant because Dai has been closely monitored by police.

Looking to APEC

110. (C) Dai and Duong made several requests. They would like to

organize a meeting between President Bush and major democracy activists during his visit in November. Barring that, they request another gesture to show USG support for democratic reform in Vietnam. They favored increased USG support for Vietnamese police training, including an exchange program to train Vietnamese in U.S. police academies.

Incidents since the 8406 Bloc Meeting

¶111. (C) Following the July 27 8406 Bloc meeting, we have received a constant stream of reports of police harassment involving members of the Bloc and the DPV. On July 28, a farmer from An Giang Province in the Mekong Delta, Kha Van Chau was intercepted leaving Tran Khue's house. Chau was working with Khue to file claims with the southern office of the central government in HCMC on land expropriation and compensation. Police reportedly forcibly returned Chau to An Giang and warned him never to return. He has since received several threatening calls on his cell phone. (See Ref D for more information on the activities and strategy of the DPV.)

¶112. (C) On August 15, Tran Khue, DPV lawyer Bui Kim Thanh and a new client were meeting in Khue's house, when local police and a man who identified himself as Thanh's husband forcibly entered. The husband accused Khue of "luring his wife into the DPV" and asked Khue to stop because "his wife has mental problems." Thanh tried to leave but her husband forced her to stay, threw cups and glasses at Thanh and kicked Khue. Khue told police to remove the man, but they refused and later wrote a report, noting that the husband "banned" his wife from associating with the DPV. Police refused Khue's request to file a report of disorderly conduct. Khue noted that Thanh's husband is a member of the Communist Party and works for a government agency in HCMC.

¶113. (C) 8406 Bloc and Bach Dang Giang member Pham Ba Hai

HO CHI MIN 00000925 003.2 OF 004

reportedly was stopped by immigration police on July 29 while trying to leave Vietnam en route to Singapore. Police told Hai that he was not yet approved to leave the country. Hai reportedly was interviewed three times by HCMC police and accused of being a member of the Bach Dang Giang organization, as well as a member of the 8406 Bloc, which he denied. Police also reportedly accused Hai of having ties in India with Kashmiri independence groups. To date, Hai remains in his home in HCMC, but has not been contacted again by police. As of August 15, the Bach Dang Giang website was inoperative. At that time the main structure on the homepage was present but no contents were available. A notice announces that the website is being upgraded. By August 17, the registered website domain name was removed completely from the Internet.

¶114. (C) Tan Vinh Phat, based in Danang, a self-declared 8406 Bloc supporter gave an interview to Radio Free Asia in which he maintained that he was called in by Danang police in early August. He was accused of writing articles to sabotage the government. We have not heard any further reports on Phat from Bloc members.

¶115. (C) On August 10, Vu Hoang Hai, a Bloc member based in HCMC, told us on the phone that he was called in for repeated "working sessions" from August 5 to 7. He claimed that he was punched in the face and neck during two of his sessions. He added that he was forced to continue with the questioning even after suffering a fainting spell. Police questioned him about his involvement with the Bloc and the Bach Dang Giang organization. Hai said that he denied any affiliation, although he is a signatory of the Bloc's founding manifesto. Hai told us that, after he was summoned again by police on August 9, friends took him into "hiding." He returned home two days later and has not been summoned again. Hai said that he must now wear a neck brace because of the injuries sustained during police questioning.

¶116. Bloc member Nguyen Ngoc Quang told us by phone that he was called in by HCMC police on August 5, 6 and 10 and accused of plotting against the Vietnamese Government and violating Article 4 of the Constitution (which asserts Communist Party "leadership" over the Government and the nation). Police said that the evidence against him is that he is a member of the Bloc, which calls for the establishment of a multi-party system. Quang told us that he acknowledged his Bloc membership. Police warned that his case would be forwarded to the Investigation Police for prosecution.

¶117. (C) Subsequently, overseas dissident websites and RFA posted

recordings of Quang's and Pham Ba hai's interview sessions with police. Quang told us that during his August 10 interrogation, police pressed him as to how these recordings were made and ordered him to remove them from the Internet. Quang said that he had no idea how and who might have recorded their conversations. Quang also told us that other members of the Bloc were searched physically for recording devices.

¶18. (C) Dai and Bloc member Nguyen Ngoc Quang called us on August 15 to report that another Bloc member, Ms. Nguyen Thuy Tram, was detained by police earlier in the day. According to Dai, she was observing roughly 100 HCMC residents protesting a land dispute in front of the HCMC People's Committee. (Note: ConGenOff saw a small group - perhaps 20 - protesters were in front of the HCMC People's Committee in the early afternoon of August 15. The streets surrounding the building were closed to traffic. End Note.) Dai and Quang said Tram was not taking pictures or joining the protesters.

¶19. (C) On August 16, we spoke with Ms. Tram, who told us she was released after roughly ten hours of detention. Tram confirmed that she and PalTalk arrestee Truong Quoc Huy came to city hall to witness the first day of the protest on August 14. At that time, Huy interviewed two representatives of the protesters. The next day, Tram went to observe the protesters by herself and was confronted by police as she was taking notes on the protest. Police accused her of "cheating the protesters" and asked her to go with them. She refused, while protesters tried to protect her. Police then pushed her into a van and took her to a local police station, where they accused her of being "lured by others to join the 8406 Bloc to attempt to overthrow the government." She was subsequently taken to the Southern Command headquarters of the Ministry of Public Security for another working session before being released. In addition to being a member of the 8406 Bloc, Tram also said that she was a participant in the PalTalk Internet forum.

¶20. (C) In a telephone conversation on August 15, Dai told us that he was called in for a "chat" with police on August 12 in Hanoi. This coincided with police summonses of four other political activists in Hanoi. According to Dai, police were investigating the "Democracy and Freedom in Vietnam Bulletin" that dissidents Bach Ngoc Duong, Nguyen Khac Toan, Hoang Tien,

HO CHI MIN 00000925 004.2 OF 004

and Toan's sister Duong Thi Xuan were publishing. Dai said that he also was called in for working sessions with police on June 1, 2 and 8. Dai said that tax and labor inspectors also raided his law offices in mid-June to probe his paperwork, but could not find any fault.

Visit with democracy activist Dr. Nguyen Dan Que

¶21. (C) In the afternoon of July 28, ConGenOffs visited Dr. Nguyen Dan Que at his home in HCMC to hand over medicine and family memorabilia from his brother in Washington. Que was in good spirits and did not complain of recent harassment. Que reiterated his support for the quickest possible accession of Vietnam to WTO as well as rapid approval of PNTR. Economic integration would lead to social and political reform, he argued. Turning to developments in the dissident community, Que was critical of the DPV because it is limited by its Vietnam War-era historical baggage. Que believes that the Vietnamese people want something new, referring to his nine-point road map to democratization (Ref E). With regard to the 8406 Bloc, Que stated that all of the political organizations in Vietnam are working towards the same goal and he would never stand in the way of one group making progress for the rest. Que noted the importance of the cooperation the 8406 Bloc had been receiving from Vietnamese inside and outside of the country, but believes that an organized group is too easy for the government to target. Even were the 8406 Bloc to be suppressed by the Party, its actions would push the envelope for other groups to make progress. Que reiterated his intent to remain independent of any movement.

Comment

¶22. (C) Without the constraints of an APEC Summit, a bilateral Presidential visit and a PNTR vote in Congress, security authorities almost certainly would have moved more aggressively to prevent dissidents from organizing and networking. The harassment of 8406 Bloc members and the DPV is another warning that Big Brother is displeased and watching closely. The

decision of pastors of the Inter Evangelical Movement (IEM) to affiliate with the 8406 Bloc might complicate efforts of that group - and others affiliated with the IEM - to secure government registration under the legal framework on religion. The IEM is a member of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, an umbrella organization of 27 house church groups with a claimed membership of 250,000. End Comment.

WINNICK